

Acknowledgements

The work described here was undertaken as part of the Ethiopian Important Bird Areas Project, financed under a joint agreement between the European Union (DG VIII B7-5040) and BirdLife International, and implemented by Ethiopian Wildlife and Natural History Society, the BirdLife partner in Ethiopia. ↻

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Comments on a possible new species of Scops Owl *Otus* sp on Réunion

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In a previous issue of *Bull ABC*, Renman reported the possible existence of a new species of owl on Réunion Island.² During a visit there in October–November 1993, he heard a call like that of a scops owl *Otus* and eventually saw the flying silhouette of a small owl-like bird disappearing into the forest. As there had been no previous report of such a bird on Réunion Island, this encounter was rather striking. Here we would like to comment on this observation and add new, as yet unreported, although less recent, sightings of a bird that seems to confirm the existence of a previously undescribed owl on Réunion.

First of all, there is a popular belief, although it has never been reported in the literature, of the presence of a nocturnal animal in Réunion forests, which might be (and is described by some islanders as) a small Strigiform. Its local name is 'Bêbête Tut', referring to its call. It should be noted that no bird currently known to exist on Réunion has a call that matches this description. Secondly, in March 1983 C. Guillermet, an entomologist, was collecting insects at night in the northern part of Réunion. Although not an ornithologist, he clearly saw what he described as an owl approaching his artificial light (Guillermet, pers comm). Unfortunately, this observation was disregarded when reported to other ornithologists at that time. Thirdly, while being totally unaware of this fact, one of us (CA) was able to tape record in September 1988 an unidentified call while searching for the highly

endangered Mascarene Petrel *Pseudobulweria aterrima*. This call was recorded in the southern part of Réunion, and remained unidentified until 1991 when VB heard it and identified it as the call of an *Otus* species. Lastly, during additional searches for the Mascarene Petrel, an unidentified, possibly *Otus*, call was again heard twice in March 1995 in the southern part of Réunion. These calls, however, do not match the one described by Renman.

To conclude, a small owl has been seen or heard on at least four occasions between 1983 and 1995, which tends to counter the possibility of vagrancy by another owl such as the Madagascar Scops Owl *Otus rutilus*. Moreover the calls of the Réunion bird are very different to that species (Attié and Bretagnolle in prep).

It seems highly likely, therefore, that an *Otus* or a similar species of owl does exist on Réunion. However, it has not yet been clearly observed, and its relationship to the recently described extinct taxon, *Mascarenottus*,¹ will have to be clarified. ↻

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